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ABSTRACT

In recent years many teachers, English departments, and school districts have taken steps towards averting censorship and strengthening the professional basis for their English language arts programs. This paper states that development of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) guidelines for selection of materials in English programs was itself the result of a careful process which began when NCTE sent out a call to schools and districts all over the country for guidelines already in use and ended when a joint committee developed the NCTE guidelines. The guidelines are divided into the following sections: Scope of the Policy for Selection of Instructional Materials; Criteria (with subsections on Connection to Educational Objectives, and Relevance to Student Needs); Procedures for Selection of Instructional Materials (with subsections on Responsibility for Selection, and Selection Procedures); and Opportunity for Informal Selection. Contains 10 resources. (NKA)

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instance, one court found the overall merit of a particular magazine article to outweigh the potentially negative impact of the author's repeated use of a profane expression (Keefe v. Geankos, 1969). The court noted that seniors in high school were "not devoid of all discrimination or resistance" and doubted that students of that age had been or could be protected from exposure to such expression.

Procedures for Selection of Instructional Materials

Good schools, recognizing the importance of support from parents and the community, operate within a framework for democratic decision-making. Materials selection and retention policies are important parts of that framework. Well-established procedures for selecting instructional material ensure public involvement and professional guidance. Therefore, it is essential that materials selection policies clearly describe the steps involved in the selection process and the personnel responsible for each step.

1. Responsibility for Selection

Selecting materials requires in-depth knowledge: not just of students' backgrounds and learning experiences, but also of their abilities, interests, and learning styles; not just of educational objectives, but of the best practices and range and quality of materials for meeting them; not just of the particular work being considered, but of its place within the medium, genre, epoch, etc., it represents. In short, responsible selection demands not only the experience and education needed to make sound choices, but also the ability to defend the choices made.

This level of expertise can be found only in the English language arts professional. Therefore, although administrators and school boards are often legally charged with the responsibility of selecting instructional materials, this responsibility should be delegated to English language arts professionals.

2. Selection Procedures

Selection procedures may vary in terms of the size of the group, nonteacher participants, and schedules, but certain elements are important. In general, selection is most appropriately done by the English language arts teachers who are closest to the students—that is, by teachers at the building level. The group's charge must be clearly specified and understood by all. The process should be part of the school's annual schedule, and adequate time must be set aside for the work at hand.

As part of its evaluation process, the selection group should discuss every work under consideration for inclusion, giving extended attention to works that are likely to be assigned for whole-class reading or viewing. However, good English language arts programs typically involve classroom paperback book libraries and extensive reading lists that individualize and expand student choices. Consequently, selection often makes use of published reviews of materials and opinions of informed peers, including district language arts coordinators, librarians, and leaders in professional associations.

All selections, including the acceptance of donated and loaned materials, should be made on the basis of the materials' strengths in terms of the selection criteria. Once selections are made, the selection group should be encouraged to maintain a file of written rationales, if only in the form of meeting notes, which explain how selections meet the selection criteria.

The selection criteria should be made public in written form. The actual materials selected will become known in due time through course syllabi, booklists circulated to students and parents, and various assignments. But the list of materials can be made available for comments by students, parents, and the public at any time, with the understanding that further informal selection and changes are sometimes made as teachers perceive numerous opportunities during the course of the year to better meet students' needs through other materials.

Opportunity for Informal Selection

Creative teachers take advantage of opportunities to use materials which do not lend themselves to the formal selection process—e.g., current newscasts, television programs, articles, student writing samples, or materials for short-term projects. Such supplemental materials may be selected by the appropriate instructor; but again they must meet the general selection criteria of educational relevance and ability to meet student needs.

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RESOURCES

The materials below are available through NCTE, many at low cost or no cost. The price in parentheses is the cost to NCTE members. When ordering, be sure to include stock numbers when appropriate.

Brown, Jean E. *Preserving Intellectual Freedom, Fighting Censorship in Our Schools*; #36711; $19.95 ($14.95)

Brown, Jean E. *SLATE on Intellectual Freedom*, #44829; $6.95 ($4.95)

Brown, Jean E. and Elaine C. Stephens. *Rationales for Teaching Challenged Books*; *SLATE Starter Sheet*, April 1994, #98610; $1.95 ($1.50)

Burress, Lee and Edward B. Jenkinson. *The Students' Right to Know*, #48034; $5.50 ($3.95)

Moe, Mary Sheehy. *Selection and Retention of Instructional Materials: What the Courts Have Said; SLATE Starter Sheet*, August 1995, #43121; $1.95 ($1.50)

National Council of Teachers of English. *Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Materials*, #19611; $1.00 ($0.75)

National Council of Teachers of English. *Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines*; free—send self-addressed, stamped envelope

National Council of Teachers of English. *The Student's Right to Read*, #48174; free—send self-addressed, stamped envelope

National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Bias and Censorship in the Elementary School. *Censorship: Don't Let It Become an Issue in Your Schools*, #05211; free—send self-addressed, stamped envelope

National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association. *Common Ground: NCTE/IRA Task Force on Intellectual Freedom Document*, #07524; free—send self-addressed, stamped envelope

To support the Council's efforts in combating censorship and promoting intellectual freedom, join SLATE (Support for Learning and Teaching of English). You'll receive three issues of the *SLATE Newsletter* and two to four *SLATE Starter Sheets* each year. Send a check or money order for $15.00 to NCTE/SLATE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

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AN NCTE STANDARDS DOCUMENT

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTION OF MATERIALS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAMS

NCTE/SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) and the NCTE Standing Committee against Censorship are pleased to present Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs.

NCTE's Student's Right to Read document has for decades been influential as a model for dealing with challenges to instructional materials. Innumerable districts throughout the country have adopted or adapted NCTE's recommendations for an orderly review process for challenged materials. Other documents, such as Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Materials, have been widely circulated.

In recent years many teachers, English departments, and school districts have taken further steps towards averting censorship and strengthening the professional basis for their English language arts programs. By *specifying the criteria used in selecting literacy works, films, and other instructional materials*, they have initiated a front-end process that provides a context for their choices. In doing so they demonstrate a high standard of professionalism while assuring various communities—parents, administrators, and others—that they have chosen materials responsibly and reflectively, with intensive knowledge of both their discipline and their students.

Development of NCTE's Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs was itself the result of a careful, well-articulated process. In 1994 NCTE sent a call to schools and districts for guidelines that are already in use throughout the country. In 1995 a joint committee from SLATE and the Standing Committee against Censorship reviewed existing materials then developed the guidelines, which were subsequently approved by the NCTE Executive Committee Subcommittee on Short Documents. We urge you to make use of this document at the departmental, building, and district levels. No permissions are required to photocopy and distribute the guidelines.

Faith Schullstrom, Executive Director

NCTE National Council of Teachers of English

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GUIDELINES FOR SELECTION OF MATERIAL

Prepared by the Joint Subcommittee (SLATE/Standing Committee against Censorship) on Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs—Mary Moe, Chair; Judy Duprez, Barbara Laurain, M. Jerry Weiss, Shirley Wright.

Instructional materials are essential tools in the English language arts classroom. They allow students to interact with words, images, and ideas in ways that develop their abilities in reading, listening, viewing, thinking, speaking, writing, and using media and technology. Because instructional materials are a primary resource for English language arts teachers, they must be selected wisely.

The cornerstone of consistent, pedagogically sound selection practices is a clear, written policy for the selection of materials in the English language arts program. Such a policy not only helps teachers to achieve program goals, but also helps schools protect the integrity of programs increasingly under pressure from censors, propagandists, and commercial interests.

Because selection policies should reflect local interests and issues and should be consistent with other locally developed policies and curriculum documents, NCTE provides no "boilerplate" to be used as a model by local schools. However, NCTE strongly recommends that English language arts teachers and school boards use the following guidelines to develop or review policies for inclusion of materials in English language arts programs.

Scope of the Policy for Selection of Instructional Materials

What do we mean by "instructional materials"? At the beginning of this century, the answer might have been simply textbooks and workbooks. Today, however, the range has broadened considerably, including paperback novels, magazines, computer software, videotapes, and much more. The focus of this document, then, is not on selection in the narrow sense of textbook adoption, but on curriculum and program planning that entails selection of a wide range of materials that can be used in whole-class study, small-group work, and by individual students in extensive reading.

As schools clarify the scope of the policy, they should consider not only purchased materials, but also materials that are provided free or on loan and those generated by the teacher and even the students (e.g., student writings discussed in class or small groups). Also, the scope of the policy should not unwittingly stifle spontaneity and creativity in teachers by requiring a formal selection process for all materials used for instructional purposes. Sometimes the most effective learning experiences are those that make use of unanticipated instructional materials: a letter to the editor in the local newspaper, for instance, or a newly released video version of a literary work read by the class.

It is important, too, to distinguish between selection of materials and retention of materials. Selection of instructional materials is part of sound program planning. Consideration of retention of materials can be part of normal program review, or it can result from a parent's or citizen's protest of materials in use. Needless to say, careful selection is a powerful buffer against protests because it assures that the program planning process was thoughtful and not haphazard. NCTE has previously published many materials on responding to protests, urgently recommending that orderly procedures be followed when an objection to instructional materials is made. (See especially *The Students' Right to Read, Censorship: Don't Let It Become an Issue in Your Schools,* and *Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Materials* in the resource list at the end of this document.)

Criteria

Each school should develop its own criteria for selecting materials for inclusion in English language arts programs, but virtually all criteria relate to two general requirements for selections: materials must (1) have a clear connection to established educational objectives and (2) address the needs of the students for whom they are intended.

1. Connection to Educational Objectives

Instructional materials in the English language arts program should align with the general philosophy of the school or district, the curriculum goals and objectives of the English language arts program, and the learning outcomes of the particular course or grade level. For instance, some materials may be included because they reflect the school's philosophy of encouraging critical

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thinking in relation to controversial situations and points of view. Or materials may be included because they meet the curriculum objective of presenting articulate voices from different eras or diverse cultures. Or they may be included to address specific learner outcomes, such as understanding how imagery can underscore theme. Richard Wright's *Native Son* may serve all of these purposes while John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* may serve only some of them. However, because both of these high quality works have a clear connection to educational objectives of the school, both might be included in the English language arts program.

Policies should also reflect the understanding that an English language arts program is not one instructional resource, but many; not one curriculum objective, but several. Therefore, English language arts policies should seek to build a collection of instructional materials that as a whole create balance and emphasis in the curriculum. Clearly, no single textbook or small set of instructional materials will meet the curricular goals of presenting various points of view, situations, and styles; addressing diverse ability levels; and representing the contributions of people of diverse religions, ages, races, ethnicity, abilities, and cultures. Nonetheless, the collection of materials in the English language arts program as a whole should address all of these concerns and should emphasize those which teachers, as informed professionals working within the district's philosophical framework, find particularly important.

Finally, materials must be selected with an eye toward coordinating instruction within and between grade levels, courses, and disciplines. Students who read or watch Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* in social studies, English, and health are getting too much of a good thing. So are the students who reported studying Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" every year in grades 7–10. By contrast, teachers of junior English cannot draw on students' shared literary background if teachers at earlier levels have used a potpourri of unarticulated works. This is not an argument for a fixed, lock-step curriculum but for a collegial sharing of goals and ideas for instructional materials as teachers engage in the process of selecting materials.

2. Relevance to Student Needs

Materials should be examined for level of difficulty. They must be readable if they are to be truly accessible to students. Because readability formulas tend to be simplistic measures, such formulas should be used cautiously, if at all. Teachers' judgments about the difficulty of a work are more soundly based on complexity of plot, organization, abstractness of the language, familiarity of vocabulary, and clarity of syntax. Also, because the average classroom includes children reading at several levels of proficiency, materials judged as inappropriate for whole-class instruction might be suitable for small-group use or individual book reviews by the more capable readers.

Reading materials which draw upon students' backgrounds are desirable. Both comprehension and motivation are often enhanced when students can activate relevant background knowledge as they read, connecting their personal experiences with vicarious experiences. This does not deny the value of reading about the unfamiliar and even the fantastic. But the relevance of a work to students' daily lives or to the lives of their imaginations is worthy of consideration in the selection process.

"Age-appropriateness" alone is never sufficient reason to include particular materials in the English language arts program; nevertheless, materials should be suited to the maturity level of the students for whom they are intended. Evaluating "age-appropriateness" can be problematic, but legal decisions have provided some guidance in this area. Generally, when courts evaluate the age-appropriateness of material, they do not consider it in isolation. They weigh the value of the material as a whole, particularly its relevance to educational objectives, against the likelihood of a negative impact on the students for whom it is intended. That likelihood is lessened by the exposure the typical student has had to the controversial subject or manner of presentation. A negative impact is also less likely if the typical student of that age is sufficiently mature to view the subject or manner of presentation within the context of the overall purpose of the work. When these mitigating factors exist and the material serves a legitimate pedagogical purpose, courts consider the material age-appropriate. For

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